# Why learn a foreign language? Benefits of bilingualism

## Learning a foreign language is more than just a boost to your CV or handy for travelling. It will make you smarter, more decisive and even better at English, says Anne Merritt.

**By Anne Merritt**

7:00AM BST 19 Jun 2013

**Comments**[76 Comments](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationopinion/10126883/Why-learn-a-foreign-language-Benefits-of-bilingualism.html#disqus_thread)

Physiological studies have found that speaking two or more languages is a great asset to the cognitive process. The brains of bilingual people operate differently than single language speakers, and these differences offer several mental benefits.

Below are seven cognitive advantages to [**learning a foreign language**](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/educationopinion/9900074/What-motivates-us-to-learn-foreign-languages.html). Many of these attributes are only apparent in people who speak multiple languages regularly – if you haven’t spoken a foreign tongue since your[A levels](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/education/secondaryeducation/), your brain might not be reaping these bilingual benefits. However, people who begin language study in their adult lives can still achieve the same levels of fluency as a young learner, and still reap the same mental benefits, too.

**You become smarter**

Speaking a foreign language improves the functionality of your brain by challenging it to recognise, negotiate meaning, and communicate in different language systems. This skill boosts your ability to negotiate meaning in other problem-solving tasks as well.

Students who study foreign languages [tend to score better on standardised tests](http://psychology.illinoisstate.edu/cbs/readings/BialystokMartin.pdf) than their monolingual peers, particularly in the categories of maths, reading, and vocabulary.Multilingual people, especially children, are skilled at switching between two systems of speech, writing, and structure. According to a [study from the Pennsylvania State University](http://news.psu.edu/story/160653/2011/02/18/juggling-languages-can-build-better-brains), this “juggling” skill makes them good multitaskers, because they can easily switch between different structures. In one study, participants used a driving simulator while doing separate, distracting tasks at the same time. The research found that people who spoke more than one language made fewer errors in their driving.

**You stave off Alzheimer’s and dementia**

Several [studies](http://www.cell.com/trends/cognitive-sciences/) have been conducted on this topic, and the results are consistent. For monolingual adults, the mean age for the first signs of dementia is 71.4. For adults who speak two or more languages, the mean age for those first signs is 75.5. Studies considered factors such as education level, income level, gender, and physical health, but the results were consistent.

**Your memory improves**

Educators often liken the brain to a muscle, because it functions better with exercise. Learning a language involves memorising rules and vocabulary, which helps strengthen that mental “muscle.” This exercise improves overall memory, which means that multiple language speakers are better at remembering lists or sequences. [Studies show](http://www.unbf.ca/L2/Research/current/documents/L2RIC_Notes_Jan09SLA_and_cognition.pdf) that bilinguals are better at retaining shopping lists, names, and directions.

**You become more perceptive**

A [study from Spain’s University of Pompeu Fabra](http://brainglot.upf.edu/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=23&Itemid=35) revealed that multilingual people are better at observing their surroundings. They are more adept at focusing on relevant information and editing out the irrelevant. They’re also better at spotting misleading information. Is it any surprise that Sherlock Holmes and Hercule Poirot are skilled polyglots?

**Your decision-making skills improve**

According to a [study from the University of Chicago](http://www.businessinsider.com/bilingual-people-make-better-financial-choices-2012-4), bilinguals tend to make more rational decisions. Any language contains nuance and subtle implications in its vocabulary, and these biases can subconsciously influence your judgment. Bilinguals are more confident with their choices after thinking it over in the second language and seeing whether their initial conclusions still stand up.

**You improve your English**

Learning a foreign language [draws your focus to the mechanics of language](http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/teachlearn/student/promobenefitslanglearning.pdf): grammar, conjugations, and sentence structure. This makes you more aware of language, and the ways it can be structured and manipulated. These skills can make you a more effective communicator and a sharper editor and writer. Language speakers also develop a better ear for listening, since they’re skilled at distinguishing meaning from discreet sounds.

*Anne Merritt is an EFL lecturer currently based in South Korea. She writes at*[***http://annemerritt.com/***](http://annemerritt.com/)